

What If It Doesn't Come Down to Turnout?

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It has now been a month since the Democratic Convention began. During that month a lot has happened in the presidential race. Both parties have had their conventions; Hillary Clinton made her convention speech urging her supporters to support the party's nominee; the war in Georgia entered and exited the center stage of the presidential campaign; Sarah Palin has emerged as the most controversial and polarizing vice-presidential nominee since at least Dan Quayle; we have all learned the term "Hockey Mom" Wall Street has collapsed; John McCain has sought to reinvent himself as a populist anti-Wall Street crusader; and the economy seems to have reemerged as the central issue in this election.

With all these events of the last month, we might expect the race to look substantially different than it did a month ago. However, on the eve of the first presidential debate, the race is looking more and more like it did for most of the early summer. To be certain, the campaigns have taken a more negative turn as new, but entirely predictable, lines of attack have opened up. Nonetheless, for the most part we are still looking at a 2-6 point lead for Obama which makes him the slight favorite, but is far from comforting for Democrats. Although a number of states where Obama initially sought to make a run, notably South Dakota and Georgia, seem to have turned into likely states for McCain, most of the states which were thought to be battleground states in mid-June still look to be battleground states today.

The race will likely remain very close over the next six weeks as the overwhelming majority of voters have already decided who they want to support, and in most cases, made that decision months ago. In the handful of remaining swing states, each candidate has a solid base of support so the election will be determined, not surprisingly, on a combination of two things: turnout and final efforts to win over swing voters.

To some extent describing a campaign as "coming down to turnout" is a polite way for pundits to say they have nothing left to say about an election. More seriously, in every election it is easy to find people from both campaigns predicting record turnout because of an array of reasons. Democratic operatives in 2004 were promising record turnout among the Democratic base for John Kerry, in 2000 for Al Gore and so on. Republican operatives made similar claims for Bush in both those campaigns.

Of course turnout fluctuates from election to election, even at the presidential level, but high turnout is generally not one-sided. Close elections which generate a lot of media and excitement drive turnout up for both sides. This year the millions of voters excited about voting for Barack Obama will more than likely be counterbalanced by the millions of voters excited about stopping Obama. Democrats should remember that Republicans also have base voters and a sophisticated campaign which will bring them to the polls.

With both sides expecting high turnout, each campaign is going to have to focus its energy and sharpen its message on persuading as many of the remaining undecided voters as possible. There have never been a lot of undecided voters in this election; and with roughly six weeks to go most polls show that ten percent or fewer of voters remain undecided. This is true nationally as well as in most key swing states. That number is actually a little lower as many undecided voters simply will not vote on Election Day, so a better number might be closer to eight percent or fewer. If the race remains this close and the number of undecided voters declines even more, the competition for the last few undecided voters will become even more intense.

It may also become more negative. The McCain campaign will likely deemphasize their new populist approach, the experience issue and the excitement generated by Sarah Palin as these issues are unlikely to move any more voters to their candidate. Similarly, Obama's themes of change and a new direction in politics are not likely persuade any additional voters.

Instead, both campaigns may well return to first principles. The election will be a battle between McCain's efforts to raise questions about the patriotism, religion, preparedness, and implicitly, race of his Democratic opponent and Obama's efforts to remind voters of the foreign policy and economic fiasco's of the last eight years. These issues may be approached indirectly, but that will be the core of each candidate's message in the last weeks when they have nowhere else, rhetorically, to go.

The race will most likely be decided by whether a few thousand voters in a few key states will allow themselves to be convinced that Obama is somehow too different and inexperienced to be president or whether, for these voters, this will be overcome by a sense that we cannot live with another four years of Republican leadership. I think Obama's message will win out over McCain's, but I still have, as unfashionable as that might be, some faith in the American electorate.